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ABSTRACT

Data from the last several decades indicate that declining public confidence in education may be closely related to declining confidence in the authority and legitimacy of the state. Annual survey data from Gallup and others and data on declining public approval of school bond issues show the drop in public confidence in education in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time public confidence in the state also declined, as evidenced by 1957-1977 annual survey data showing long term declines in "trusting" and long term increases in "cynical" attitudes toward government. Given the centrality of education in state activities, it is likely that declining public confidence in education reflects the wider decline in confidence in public authority. At the same time, declining confidence in education may contribute to the declining confidence in the state. Since attitudes toward education are probably more related to this general decline in confidence than to purely educational factors, actions to improve education will probably change education's public standing very little. Further research is needed, however, on the modern state's legitimacy and on the state's use of its educational activities to compensate for legitimacy lost elsewhere. (Author/RW)

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EDUCATION, PUBLIC CONFIDENCE, AND THE LEGITIMACY OF THE MODERN STATE: IS THERE A "CRISIS" SOMEWHERE?

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June 1982

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Abstract

Based on an extensive review of public opinion and related data gathered over the past twenty years, the paper argues:

(a) that there is a substantial decline of confidence in this country's public education;

(b) that this decline mirrors and reflects a much more encompassing and fundamental decline of confidence in the authority of the state, and that it is thus more deeply embedded in the political life of the country than if it were "merely" an instance of dissatisfaction with the public school system as such; and

(c) that the decline in confidence in public education in turn tends to compound and aggravate the general "crisis of confidence" of the state in this as well as other Western societies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper argues, in brief,

(a) that there is a substantial decline of confidence in this country's public education;

(b) that this decline mirrors and reflects a much more encompassing and fundamental decline of confidence in the public authority of the state, and that it is thus more endemic to the political life of the country than if it were "merely" an instance of dissatisfaction with the public school system as such; and

(c) that the decline in confidence in public education in turn tends to compound and aggravate the general "crisis of confidence" of the state in this as well as other Western societies.

Whether all of this, if it can be substantiated, amounts to something that should be called a "crisis" may ultimately turn on a question of semantics. The paper does argue, however, that the phenomenon of declining confidence in both education and the state, and the apparent interaction between the two, have developed to a point where they should become a matter of serious concern to those who educate and those who are being educated, as well as to those who rule and to those who are being ruled in this country.

2. DECLINING CONFIDENCE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

That public education has been facing, over the last decade or so, a loss of credibility, prestige, and confidence on the part of the American public is by now a rather commonplace observation, expressed in the most diverse circles for the most diverse reasons (Greene 1982; Kirst 1981; Peterson 1981). The evidence that there has been both a consistent and significant decline seems incontrovertible, as will be reviewed instantly, and is hardly disputed or disputable. What observers of public education in the U.S. do disagree over, however, are such things as the "seriousness" of the decline, its likely future trend, and both its meaning and its probable causes. That is, of course, as it should be. From the point of view of both scholarship and policymaking, it is explaining and understanding a phenomenon that counts, and this is what the major portion of this paper will be about. As a first step, however, let us briefly re-examine some of the evidence on the decline of confidence in public education.

2.1 The Gallup poll data

The most readily available and most frequently cited evidence on public confidence in education is the annual poll conducted by the Gallup organization which, over the past thirteen years, has provided a fairly detailed measure of how the American public feels about their schools. Unfortunately, the most easily standardized and comparable question -- asking respondents to rate the schools on a grade scale from A through F -- was not introduced into the poll until 1974, and we will look more closely at the response pattern since then. It is instructive, however, to note that in the preceding 5th poll (1973), respondents were asked to rate

their own change in attitude towards the public schools in recent years, and that more respondents (36%) indicated having become less favorable, as against 32% who rated themselves as having become more favorable (with the remaining 32% reporting no change or no opinion) (Elam 1978, 153). The preponderance of discouragement over encouragement, incidentally, is particularly pronounced in cities over 50,000. Another rather simple probe into the extent of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with public education goes back to polls in 1946 and 1967, and shows satisfied respondents outnumbering dissatisfied ones by more than four to one (87% to 13% in 1946, 71% to 19% in 1967; Gallup 1972, I, 597; III, 2069; cf also III, 1844 and 2036-2037).

However one may wish to calibrate these earlier findings with the evidence we have for the 1970s, it seems that the last decade has seen an increasingly more critical posture towards public schools. Table 1 summarizes the ratings on the A through F scale for the period since 1974. The pattern is clear enough: When one aggregates "good" grades (A and B) and "bad" grades (C through F), a sixteen percentage point advantage of good grades over bad grades in 1974 turns into its exact opposite by 1981, with bad grades outweighing good grades by eighteen percentage points (see also Figure 1). Just to be sure, we have subjected these data to a somewhat more careful statistical treatment, using Friedman's two-way analysis of variance by ranks for the entire set of data, and Kendall's tau for the rank-order comparison between 1974 and 1981. In both cases, the differences over this seven-year time span are statistically significant at the .01 level (Weiler and Gonzalez 1981, Appendix II).

There are, of course, a number of qualifications to be made with regard to these data, notably with regard to the different ratings given by different subsets of the population (parents with/without children in school, etc.), but the overall picture is clear and striking enough: A key social institution undergoes, over the span of seven years (and maybe longer), a massive reversal in the degree to which it is publicly respected and appreciated. Against this background, it seems both premature and exaggerated to call the levelling off in the decline that appears in the 1981 Gallup poll "a vote of qualified confidence" (Report on Education Research 1981, 3).

2.2 Confidence in the institution of schooling

A number of other measures tend to confirm the pattern that emerges from the annual Gallup polls, even though the data are somewhat less neatly laid out. In Gallup's own regular "confidence in institutions" poll, people's confidence in education shows again a consistent, though less dramatic decline in the number of those who have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in education, and an increase in the number of those who have only "some", "very little" or no confidence (Table 2 and Figure 2).

Data gathered by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) on confidence in the leadership of different public institutions, provide further and even more striking evidence in the same general direction. Although the surveys catch more ups and downs in the public mood, the overall trend is well reflected in the decline, between 1973 and 1978, of those who express "a great deal" of confidence in the leadership of public

education (from 37% in 1973 to 28% in 1978) and in the increase of those (61% to 70%) who have "only some" or "hardly any" confidence (NORC 1978, 103-106; cf. Figure 6, which is based on a "Percentage Difference Index" (PDI) constructed from the NORC data).

A similarly striking piece of evidence from public opinion data comes from California, where the Fields poll has conducted its own "confidence in institutions" survey over the years. The results, presented in Table 3 and Figure 3, provide yet another signal of the erosion of confidence in public schooling.

2.3 Other measures of decline

If, as these data seem to show, public education does face a problem of public confidence, it should show not only in measures of public opinion, but also in some of the indicators of public behavior. One such indicator reflects the public's (or at least the voting public's) willingness to approve public school bonds in bond elections. By all accounts, this should be a fairly robust measure: since school bond supporters are more likely to turn out and vote, approval rates would tend to overestimate the favorable disposition towards schools in the public at large. Even so, however, the data show a considerable decline in the percentage of school bond issues approved by the American voters between fiscal years 1957-58 and 1976-77 (see Table 4 and Figure 4). Here again, the data were subjected to an analysis of variance, which confirmed the overall impression that the difference between the different periods represented in the data was highly significant (Weiler and Gonzalez, op.cit.). In other words: The trend in attitudinal support for the public schools

which was discussed earlier appears to have both a correlate and an antecedent reaching back into the 1960s in the overall pattern of the public's reaction to proposed school bond issues.

The Gallup poll backs up this trend: While in 1969, the advocates and opponents of tax increases for local schools were of about equal strength (45% vs. 49%), in 1981 the opponents of tax increases outnumber the advocates by a clear two-to-one margin (60% vs. 30%). While it is true (and not surprising) that parents with children in public schools look slightly more favorably at the issue of raising the schools' tax revenue (36% for vs.58% against in 1981), the difference to parents of private school children (35% vs. 57%) or to adults with no children in school (27% vs. 60%, with a larger "don't know" share of 13%) is nowhere near significant enough to explain this massive shift away from support for the schools (Phi Delta Kappa 1981, 37).

To be sure, education continues to be relatively high on the list of social activities which Americans consider to be in need and worthy of public funding (cf. Current Opinion 1976; Ladd et al. 1979; Martin 1981, 56); also, there are areas of government expenditure where the decline of public support has been a good deal more precipitous than for education (e.g., welfare; cf. Converse et al. 1980, 387). But the fact remains that what was once a high and solid level of public appreciation of, and support for, its school system appears to have suffered from considerable erosion over the last decade or more.

But what does this erosion mean? Is it something that reflects uniquely upon our schools and indicates a particular disillusionment with

either the quality of education or with the capacity of the school system to improve the quality of individual and collective life? Or does the erosion of public confidence in education reflect something much broader than the schools -- something which may have to do with changes in more diffuse and encompassing orientations towards public institutions?

Obviously, both the theoretical question of how to account for the patterns which we have discussed in this preceding section, and the eminently practical policy question of what can be done "to galvanize renewed public support" (Kirst 1981, 45) require more clarity and insight into exactly what the nature and the causes of the apparent problem of public education in this country would seem to be. It is only after we have obtained more of an answer to this question than seems presently available that we can deal with the issue of whether the decline in support for American public education would deserve to be called a "crisis".

3. DECLINING CONFIDENCE IN THE STATE

3.1 The modern state and its crisis of confidence

The contention of this paper is, as will be recalled, that the problems of public education are in large measure not its own, but rather reflect a much wider problem that is endemic to modern societies in general, and to this country, in particular. This problem, I will argue, has to do with the erosion of confidence in public authority in general, and manifests itself both in growing cynicism vis-a-vis the state and its agencies and in the progressive loss of confidence in public institutions which are sponsored, supported, authorized by, or otherwise identified with the state. (It should be noted that, when we talk in this context about "the state" , we are referring not to the particular American entity of a state in the union, but in the more theoretical sense of the totality of public authority in a given society, regardless of the level -- national, state, or local -- at which it may manifest itself.)

There is, of course, nothing strikingly new about this observation. Various empirical indicators have shown for some time now a persistent trend of declining confidence in the state and its institutions, and we will review some of these data shortly. At the same time, and in part connected to the appearance of this trend, a major debate has developed in more theoretical terms on the problem of credibility, governability, and legitimacy which the modern state is alleged to face. Contributions to this debate derive from a considerable variety of sources and theoretical positions, and it would go considerably beyond the scope of this

paper to attempt even a summary overview. While some of the earlier phases of this debate had their center of gravity in Western Europe, it now extends throughout the advanced industrialized world. Clearly, Habermas' early thesis on the "legitimacy crisis" of the modern state (1975) has played an important role in initiating this debate, as has -- arguing from a very different set of premises -- the "Report on the Governability of Democracies" which was prepared under the auspices of the Trilateral Commission (Crozier et al. 1975). On the European side, the entire 1975 convention of the West German Political Science Association was devoted to the legitimacy problem of the modern democratic state (Kielmannsegg 1976; Ebbighausen 1976), reflecting a level and intensity of concern which somewhat preceded comparable discussions in this country. In the meantime, however, the debate on the issue of legitimacy has picked up in North America as well, stimulated by a considerable variety of inputs: from Alan Wolfe's incisive analysis of "the limits of legitimacy" and of the incompatibility between capitalism and democracy (1977), through a number of instructive symposia organized around the legitimacy question (Vidic and Glassman 1979; Denitch 1979; Lindberg et al. 1975), to Freedman's detailed observations on "crisis and legitimacy" in the administrative processes of American government (1978).

While the premises and theoretical propositions vary considerably across these contributions, they do have in common a very basic concern with the nature of the modern state's authority and with the challenges which the exercise of that authority faces. Whether the explanation of the "crisis" focuses on governmental "overload" (Lindberg 1975; Douglas 1976; Rose 1980), on the decline and the shortcomings of existing modes of representation

through parties and parliaments (Berger 1979; Wolin 1980), or on the contradictions inherent in modern capitalism and its relationship to the state (Offe 1976; Wolfe 1977) -- one of the key symptoms of the problem is the state's loss of credibility and confidence among those whose continued support would allow the state to go on navigating between the equally hazardous extremes of disintegration and coercion.

3.2 Indicators of declining confidence

Against the background of this theoretical reflection, it should be instructive to look at least at some of the empirical indicators of trust and confidence in American politics. Fortunately for our purposes, the perseverance of American public opinion researchers and a long-standing interest of political scientists in the question of "regime support" have provided us with a rather rich data base. There is a wealth of studies looking at the question of confidence at one point in time, inquiring both into the internal structure of confidence-related beliefs and into their correlates (e.g., Sniderman et al. 1975; Citrin et al. 1975; Sniderman 1981). For our purposes, however, data gathered over a span of time are more useful to ascertain such developmental trends as may exist in Americans' perceptions of the state and its credibility. We are therefore primarily drawing here on data which, since 1952, have been compiled by the Center for Political Studies (CPS) at the University of Michigan as part of its regular opinion surveys at the time of national elections (W. Miller et al. 1980). As necessary and appropriate, we will draw on supplementary data as we go along. Terminologically speaking, the attitudes we are interested in are normally classified in the data as "confidence" or "trust" in government, or as their opposites,

"cynicism" or "alienation" (for the debate on the finer points of this terminology, see Sniderman 1981; Easton 1975; Parry 1976).

The principal finding from these data is stark and simple: Over the decade of the 1960s and 1970s, American's trust in their government has declined consistently and dramatically. The percentage of those whom the CPS measures classify as "trusting" has declined from 58% in 1958 to 19% in 1978, while those considered "cynical" towards government have increased from 11% to 52% over the same period (Table 5 and Figure 5) -- a complete reversal in the distribution of trust and cynicism across the American people!

When A. Miller (1974) looked at the trend that had become apparent in these data already by 1970, he noted "the strong trend of increasing political cynicism" and spoke of "a situation of widespread, basic discontent and political alienation....in the U.S. today" (951-952). He proceeded to relate this phenomenon to the public reactions to political issues and public policy (a relationship to which we will return in a later part of this paper) and generated a rather lively and instructive debate in the discipline (cf. Citrin 1974). One of the points of contention in this debate was whether the level of cynicism that had been reached in 1970 was such that it should cause concern from the point of view of basic support for the American political system. However one may assess the merits which the argument may have had at the time, it should be noted that, in 1970, the "trusting" respondents still outnumbered, if ever so slightly, their cynical fellow citizens. Eight years, and one Watergate, later, the overall confidence curve has dropped by again as much as it did over the

period which Miller studied, and the cynics now outnumber the trustful by better than two and a half to one.

While this overall pattern is clear and unequivocal enough, a few related observations are in order. First of all, the data contain a number of other measures which tend to confirm what we have seen on the confidence/cynicism dimension. This is especially true for two closely related measures, "external political efficacy" and "government responsiveness". On the first of these, where data are only avilable since 1968, the decline is virtually isomorphic with that on the trust measure (with a PDI of +2 in 1968 and of -25 in 1978; W. Miller et al 1980, 278). On government responsiveness, the decline ranges from a high of 44 in 1964 to a low of 9 in 1976 and a slight upswing to 17 in 1978 (ibid., 283). The decline in people's trust in the government thus seems to reflect a more general orientation towards the state and its institutions -- one which is characterized not only by a conspicuous lack of confidence, but also by serious and increasing doubts as to whether the state is either willing or capable of adequately responding to the needs of society. Looking at some of the more sanguine interpretations of this phenomenon in the literature, one must ask whether the breadth and extent of this constantly increasing dissatisfaction can still be subsumed under "vigilant skepticism" (Citrin 1974, 988) or seen as "a mechanism of social control, on balance favoring conformity to the norms of democratic politics" (Sniderman 1981, 162).

The debate on just how much of a "crisis of confidence" this pattern of public opinion over the last twenty years represents has

meanwhile generated a good deal of momentum, as in the argument between Patrick Caddell and Warren Miller in the pages of Public Opinion (1979). Given the data we have discussed here and a good deal of additional evidence on which he draws, it is difficult to find fault with Caddell's conclusion that the American people "are losing faith in the ability of our institutions or their leaders either to be responsive or to solve their problems" (ibid., 58) and that, "as of today, governmental institutions have so little credibility that it is impossible for many people to believe them on anything." (ibid.) Whether calling all this a "crisis" or something else may ultimately be a question of semantic choice. Miller's response to Caddell's argument and evidence, however, largely limiting itself as it does to the relatively minor changes between 1976 and 1978 and to the question of partisan correlates of confidence, would hardly seem to do justice to the obvious magnitude of the problem -- his upbeat invocation of "the Rooseveltian spirit" (ibid., 60) notwithstanding. Similar doubts must be allowed when, faced with the same kind of data which we have just reviewed, Everett Ladd editorializes that Americans "are just about as dissatisfied as they should be", and that "they are not saying anything that is very alarming" or that could not be remedied by taking care of "spotty performance by leaders and central social institutions"(ibid. 27). Somewhat ironically, these soothing statements are found on the same page as a big pie chart reporting the result of a CBS News/New York Times poll of July 1979, in which an overwhelming 86% of the respondents had agreed with the statement "that there is a moral and spiritual crisis, that is, a crisis of confidence, in this country today".

Interestingly enough, orientations which also have to do with trust, confidence, and satisfaction, but at a personal and inter-personal level rather than involving the "government", show little if any decline over the years. The "trust in people" index in the CPS data shows the percentage of the least trustful rise slightly from 21% in 1964 to 24% in 1976, while the most trustful group declines equally modestly from 38% to 35% (W. Miller et al. 1980, 293). Similarly, people's assessment of their own ability to influence the course of political events (as measured by the "internal political efficacy" index) remains remarkably steady (at a moderately negative level) over the entire 1952 to 1978 period: starting out at a PDI level of -17 in 1952 and ending up, in 1978, at -16 (ibid., 273). And where "general satisfaction with life" is concerned, without any reference to the role of government, a variety of survey data concur in presenting a picture of not more than marginal changes, at least over the period of the 1970s(cf. Public Opinion 1979, 36-37).

Thus, it does seem that dissatisfaction and loss of confidence are not in the nature of a diffuse feeling of general malaise, but are instead rather focused on the state and its institutions, and tend to reflect an increasingly skeptical and disillusioned citizenry in its perception of public authority. It is this increasing skepticism in the public's attitudes towards the state which provides an important explanatory dimension for our concern with the loss of public confidence in education.

4. CONFIDENCE AND THE CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY

4.1 The nature of the crisis

The data presented in the earlier part of this paper have shown that there is a decline of confidence in public education, and that the decline is considerable, consistent, and (for all we can tell) continuing. Is that a "crisis"? To some extent, of course, the answer depends on semantics, but not entirely. "Crisis" does have, whatever its parameters are defined to be, a connotation of severity and ultimacy which counsels caution in using it. The fact that a sizeable and increasing portion of the American public has, over the last decade or so, become disenchanted with their schools has to be taken very seriously by everybody who cares about the social health of this country and of its educational system. But it does not, in and of itself, qualify as a "crisis". People have a way of getting dissatisfied with public policies in other areas -- housing, public transport, medical care, etc. -- and some of that dissatisfaction has tended to become fairly intense and rather persistent. We will need to look a little later into the possible cumulative effect of policy dissatisfaction, but at this point it should be clear that dissatisfaction with any given policy hardly deserves the alarming connotation of "crisis".

Nor has this ever been our argument. As will be recalled from the introduction to this paper, we have argued that it is at least conceivable that the decline of public confidence in education is but a reflection of a much more encompassing and pervasive erosion of confidence in public authority and public institutions, and that this general erosion may well "spill over" into the realm of attitudes towards specific institutions which, like schools, are sponsored and sustained by public authority.

It is against the background of this argument that we have reviewed, in the preceding section, some of the evidence on public trust in the institutions and activities of the state. As we have seen, the picture that emerges from that review is striking enough. For as far back as we have fairly good data, there has been a constant and, seen over the entire span of the last two decades, dramatic loss of confidence in government.

For the moment, we will leave it to our learned colleagues in political science to figure out why this remarkable decline occured. Given the state of the discipline, the answers are likely to reflect quite a spectrum of theoretical positions on the nature of the modern state and on the challenges to its legitimacy. What is of more immediate interest to this paper, however, is the remarkable parallel between what happened over the last ten or fifteen years to the public's confidence in education and what the data show about the general erosion of trust in public authority. In fact, if one compares Figure 1 (the distribution of good grades and bad grades for schools over time) and Figure 5 (the percentages of "cynical" and "trusting" respondents in the Michigan surveys since 1958), the general complexion of the curves -- at least for the 1970s, where we have data on both -- is remarkably similar. The data for California alone, where the combined percentages for high and moderate supporters of public education and the percentage of low supporters have come close to parity by 1981, are of the same nature (see Figure 3).

At this point, I hasten to reiterate the severe limitations in the kind of evidence we have been examining. Even though all of these

data were gathered by respectable and respected polling and public opinion research organizations, we know that survey data provide a limited view of reality at best. This is one reason why other indicators, such as the approval rate of school bond issues, provide useful collateral evidence; in the case of trust in government, the relationship with behavioral measures such as self-reported voter turnout or the CPS "electoral participation index" is much less clear, and will require some further examination (cf. W. Miller et al. 1980, 317-328).

At the same time, however, where the evidence from survey data is so consistently unequivocal, and where the parallels between confidence data for education and for public authority in general are as striking as they appear to be, we should be prepared to take matters rather seriously. This would seem to be all the more justified where, as I suggest we do, we have the makings of a fairly compelling theoretical argument to back up and make sense of the empirical evidence.

We have already referred to the extensive theoretical literature which, from a variety of perspectives, has emerged in recent years around the question of the legitimacy of the modern state and about the various reasons why that legitimacy might be in jeopardy. This is not the place to review this literature in greater detail; suffice it to suggest that the strength of much of the theoretical argument on the erosion of legitimacy in the modern state is such that findings of the kind of the Michigan data on political cynicism appear hardly surprising. If indeed, as some of the theoretical propositions suggest, the state is losing progressively its capacity to satisfy its citizens' expectations (not just in terms of material benefits, but also in terms of moral

leadership), or if its mechanisms of representation become increasingly impermeable and sclerotic, or if there is indeed an inherent contradiction between capitalist norms of production and accumulation and democratic norms of participation and equity -- then it would not be at all surprising that an attentive populace should become progressively more cynical in its views of the state and its institutions. By the same token, it should not be too difficult to sustain the theoretical argument that public education is a prime candidace for sharing in this more general disillusionment. After all, given the importance of education as the prime societal mechanism not only for the socialization of the young, but also for the allocation of social status and of the rewards that go with it, it seems reasonable to suggest that, among all of the state's activities, its involvement in sponsoring and sustaining public education is seen as a particularly crucial and central function. Looking at the relative salience of different policy issues on the public's agenda in five Western nations, Barnes and Kaase found concerns over education rank at or near the top in all of them, and sharing first place with crime control in the U.S., with a salience score of 4.1 on a five-point scale (Barnes and Kaase 1979, 413).

Given this centrality of education in the public's concern with the policy performance of the state, it does not seem to be unreasonable to extend our theoretical argument this one step further and suggest that public education may well be a particularly likely candidate for sharing the state's problems of credibility and legitimacy. On that basis, the apparent parallel in our data on confidence in education and on confidence in government may begin not only to make more sense, but also to indicate a much more pervasive and encompassing problem than

merely dissatisfaction with a particular policy sector. If indeed our observations on the loss of credibility of public schooling do reflect such a broader decline in the credibility of the state and its activities, the notion of "crisis" may become somewhat less inappropriate than we suggested a while ago.

Let me briefly suggest another way of elaborating this argument. If we were to look at a range of institutions, we would posit that the level of public confidence in a given institution should, among other things, be a function of how "public" or how closely identified with the state it is seen as being. Poll data on confidence in particular institutions and their leadership over the last decade provide some first clues for pursuing this notion further. Figure 6, which is based on the NORC General Social Surveys, shows that there is considerable decline in the rate of confidence in some of the most immediately "statal" institutions, notably Congress and the Executive Branch as well as public education. However, we would clearly need to look for further explanations in order to account for the similarly drastic loss of confidence in organized labor and television and for the remarkably steady performance of as clearly "statal" an institution as the military (for related data, see Public Opinion 1979, 30-32; Gallup Opinion Index 1979, 1; Gallup 1981, 245-249).

4.2 Policy dissatisfaction and cynicism

We have so far argued that there is a close interdependence in the "crisis of confidence" between education and the state. Beyond this, however, there is a further step in our argument which, to the extent that it can be sustained, would add another element or degree of

seriousness to the phenomenon we are discussing. This argument, in short, suggests that dissatisfaction with public education is not just a reflection of a broader crisis of confidence in public authority, but may well contribute to it and thereby engender further cynicism towards the state.

Our argument derives in part from the work of A. Miller who, in trying to shed light on the first phase of the decline in political trust (1964 to 1970), examined "the impact that reactions to political issues and public policy have on the formation of political cynicism" (1974, 952). His analysis, based on a total of eight different policy issues, concludes that "the widespread discontent prevalent in the U.S. today arises, in part, out of dissatisfaction with the policy alternatives that have been offered as solutions to contemporary problems" (ibid., 970). While Miller's article generated a rather lively discussion, his "policy dissatisfaction theory" was not seriously challenged (cf. Citrin 1974, 974). Based on an entirely different set of data, gathered in 1972, Citrin et al. (1975) report strong positive associations between the assessment of governmental performance in a number of policy areas and scores on an index of political alienation, which remain statistically significant even after income or satisfaction with one's present standard of living is controlled for. The correlation (Pearson r) between alienation and dissatisfaction with government performance in education is, at .40, one of the highest, exceeded only by the coefficients for dissatisfaction in the areas of employment, the war in Vietnam, and ecology (1975, 19-21).

Again, not too much ought to be made of these findings in and of themselves, but they do lend further credibility to our suggestion that, beyond merely reflecting a more generalized feeling of distrust in public authority, a decline in public satisfaction with the schools may well be an important contributing factor to sustaining and exacerbating the state's "crisis of confidence". Two conditions would seem to add to this probability: (a) an extended, and possibly aggravating, period of dissatisfaction with the state's performance in as critical and salient a policy area as education; and (b) a situation where dissatisfaction would accumulate across several policy areas. On both of these counts, the indications in contemporary American society are such that the reinforcement of the "crisis" appears as a distinct possibility.

There is yet another dimension to the study of policy dissatisfaction which, while going beyond the scope of this paper, will eventually deserve closer attention. I am referring to the relationship between policy dissatisfaction and protest behavior, where some recent work has identified rather striking levels of association for the U.S. as well as a number of other Western countries. The Barnes/Kaase study of five Western nations identifies policy dissatisfaction as one of the strongest predictors of "protest potential" overall, and the U.S. as showing the strongest degree of association of all five countries (Barnes and Kaase 1979, 438; cf. also the Michigan data on the change in "protest approval" over time, in W. Miller et al. 1980, 298-302). Probing further into the relationship between policy dissatisfaction, cynicism and protest should cast some useful further light both on the likely effects of discontent in such critical policy areas as education, and on the behavioral correlates of growing political cynicism.

5. CONCLUSION

Looking at the decline in political trust between 1964 and 1970, A. Miller suggested in 1974 that "in a system as stable as that in the U.S., ... it is difficult to conceive of the trend in trust continuing to decline at the same rate it has from 1964 to 1970" (1974, 971). The inconceivable has happened, however; confidence in government, after a brief levelling off between 1970 and 1972, has continued its downward slope just as precipitously since then as it did before.

One of the main arguments of this paper has been that attitudes towards public education have been riding on the coattails of this phenomenon, and have had much less to do with the kind of intra-educational factors which are usually cited in explaining the declining standing of our schools in the public eye (e.g., Kirst 1981, 52). To be sure, people, especially parents, are bound to be preoccupied over declining SAT scores and vandalism in schools; but the point is that, even if SAT scores rose and the vandals started behaving themselves, it would be very unlikely to make much difference in the overall public assessment of the public education enterprise. It is just not conveivable that, at a time when cynicism about public authority is at an all-time high (and, for all we know, rising), as central and, fundamentally, as political an institution as education could bounce back to new heights -- or even modest elevations -- of public confidence and esteem.

I have also referred to and, at least in part, concurred in the argument that policy dissatisfaction in such key areas as education has been one of the contributing factors to the more general "crisis of confidence" in public authority. This is probably true, but -- as is the case for most interpretations of correlational findings -- only partly so. I would strongly suggest that we allow the reverse interpretation to take its share of credit for the kinds of association between policy dissatisfaction and cynicism that we have referred to earlier. In other words: while dissatisfaction with certain policies may have contributed to the rise of political cynicism, the general crisis of confidence in the authority and legitimacy of the state has most probably also affected the way in which Americans look at particular public institutions. Inquiries into these linkages which go beyond cross-sectional analysis would thus be a matter of particular importance.

If it is true, or to the extent that it is true, that what we are facing is not just a problem or a crisis of education, but a much more pervasive erosion of credibility of public authority -- "authority hath been broken into pieces", in the words of a 17th-century gentleman from The Whitehall Debates (as quoted by Schaar 1969, 276) -- then what is there to do?

I have already argued that whatever we may be able to do about public education per se -- and there is undoubtedly a great deal that should and could be done to make it a better institution, regardless of public opinion -- is not likely to make an important difference in the public standing of the institution as long as the overall level of political cynicism persists.

Thus, our agenda of inquiry gets redirected at the broader issue of the legitimacy of the state. By way of suggesting a first set of items for this agenda, let me point out the following:

(1) We do need to understand better the nature and the causes of the loss of legitimacy of the modern state. This is, as I have pointed out before and elsewhere (Weiler 1981a, Weiler and Gonzalez 1981), in no small measure a task of further developing our theoretical comprehension of the nature of the state in advanced industrial societies. It is also in a very fundamental sense a task for comparative inquiry, aimed at identifying both the commonalities and the differences of the problem in different societies, and deriving from that further insight into the generic nature of the legitimacy issue. One subset of this task is, of course, to inquire further into how public perceptions of the state and its institutions form and change over time, and to shed some more light on the causal dynamics in what we have suspected to be a reciprocal relationship between policy dissatisfaction and cynicism.

(2) The other task I would like to suggest against the background of this paper has to do with the study of educational policy, i.e., of the state's behavior in the realm of education, within the conceptual context of the legitimacy issue. Much of my current work is centered on this issue, and more specifically on the proposition that educational policy (as policy in other areas) can best be understood and analyzed as a means of "compensatory legitimation", i.e., as an attempt by the state to make policies in such a way as to maximize their contribution to replenishing the draining pool of its own legitimacy. In looking at educational policy in this as well as in other countries, we have found this proposition

to open up some important and useful perspectives on different aspects of public policy in education (Weiler and Gonzalez 1981; Weiler 1981a; 1981b; 1981c). Without going into any detail on this work, let me point out that we have found it particularly useful to conceive of three types of policy behavior as strategies of compensatory legitimation:

(a) Legitimation by legalization: Analyzing the increasing role of legal norms and judicial involvement in education as an attempt to marshal what is seen as the most intact (from the point of view of legitimacy) aspect of public authority -- its legal framework and judicial institutions -- as a means of compensatory legitimation (see Weiler 1981b).

(b) Legitimation by expertise: Considering policy-related expertise (primarily in the form of evaluation, experimentation, and planning) as a source of both prestige and conflict management potential and thus as a major instrument of compensatory legitimation in a modern state where both policy expertise and the capacity to contain or manage policy conflict is increasingly questioned (Weiler 1981a, 16-25).

(3) Legitimation by participation: Predicated on the notion that existing systems of representation have become faulty and inadequate and that alternatives or supplementary mechanisms of participatory interest articulation become necessary to bolster the legitimacy of a state which is increasingly seen as unrepresentative and unresponsive (Weiler 1981a, 25-32).

These are, as I have said, analytical propositions, which have so far demonstrated at least a considerable heuristic utility. At the same time, however, there is reason, primarily on theoretical grounds, to doubt whether compensatory devices such as these are at all capable to have more than a marginal effect on the overall crisis of legitimacy of the modern state.

That, however, is yet another story.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLE 1

RANKING OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 1974-1981

	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981
A	18%	13%	13%	11%	9%	8%	10%	9%
B	30%	30%	29%	26%	27%	26%	25%	27%
C	21%	28%	28%	28%	30%	30%	29%	34%
D	6%	9%	10%	11%	11%	11%	12%	13%
F	5%	7%	6%	5%	8%	7%	6%	7%
Don't know	20%	13%	14%	19%	15%	18%	18%	10%

Source: Elam 1978 (for 1974-1978); Phi Delta Kappan 1979; 1980; 1981.

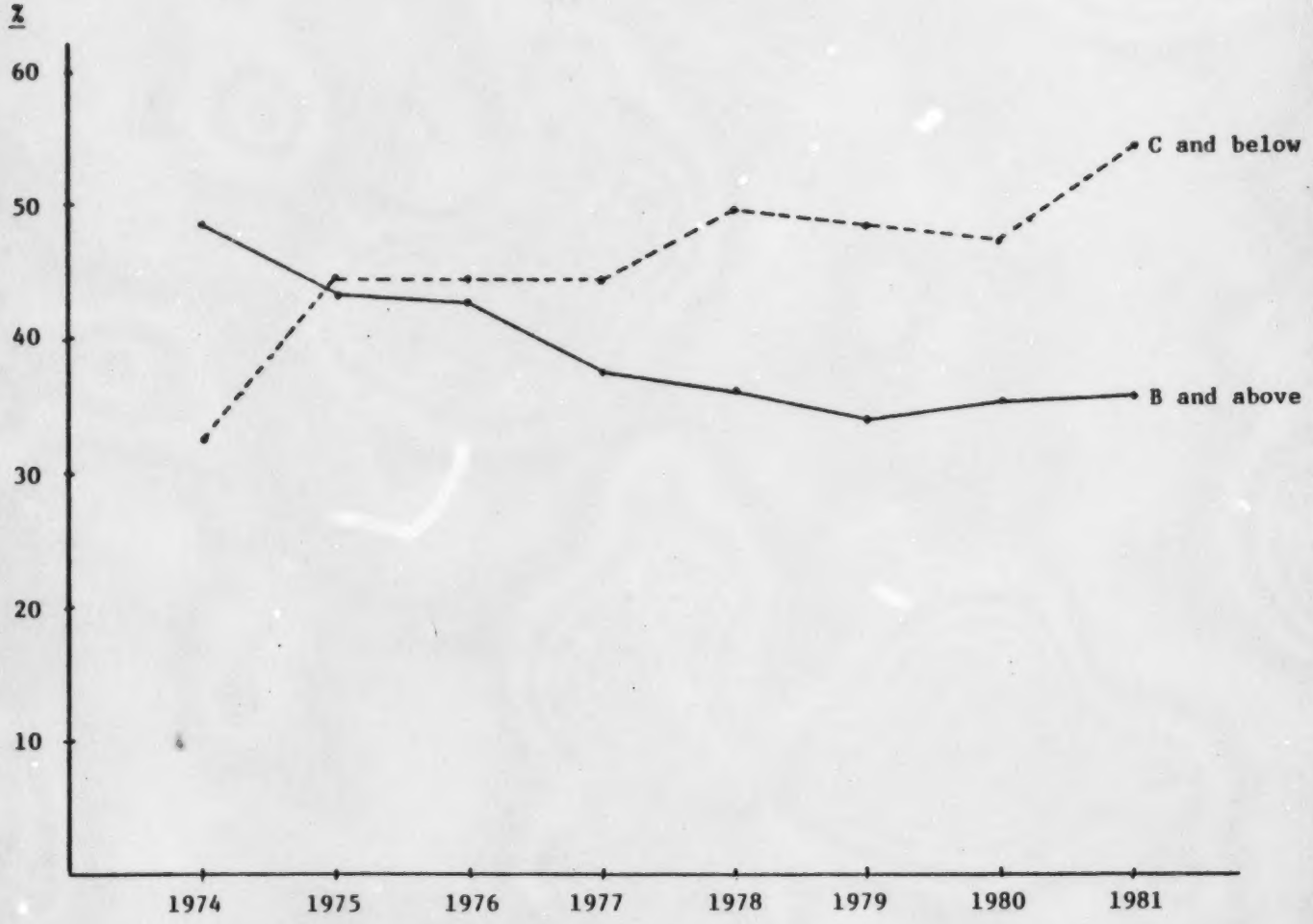

Fig. 1: Distribution of "good" and "bad" grades for public schools, 1974-1981
Source: As for Table 1.

TABLE 2. PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION, 1973-1979

	1973	1975	1977	1979
A great deal	29%	22%	22%	23%
Quite a lot	29%	34%	32%	30%
Some	27%	25%	25%	30%
Very little	9%	15%	16%	14%
None	2%	1%	1%	1%
No opinion	4%	3%	4%	2%

Source: Gallup Opinion Index 1973; 1977; 1979

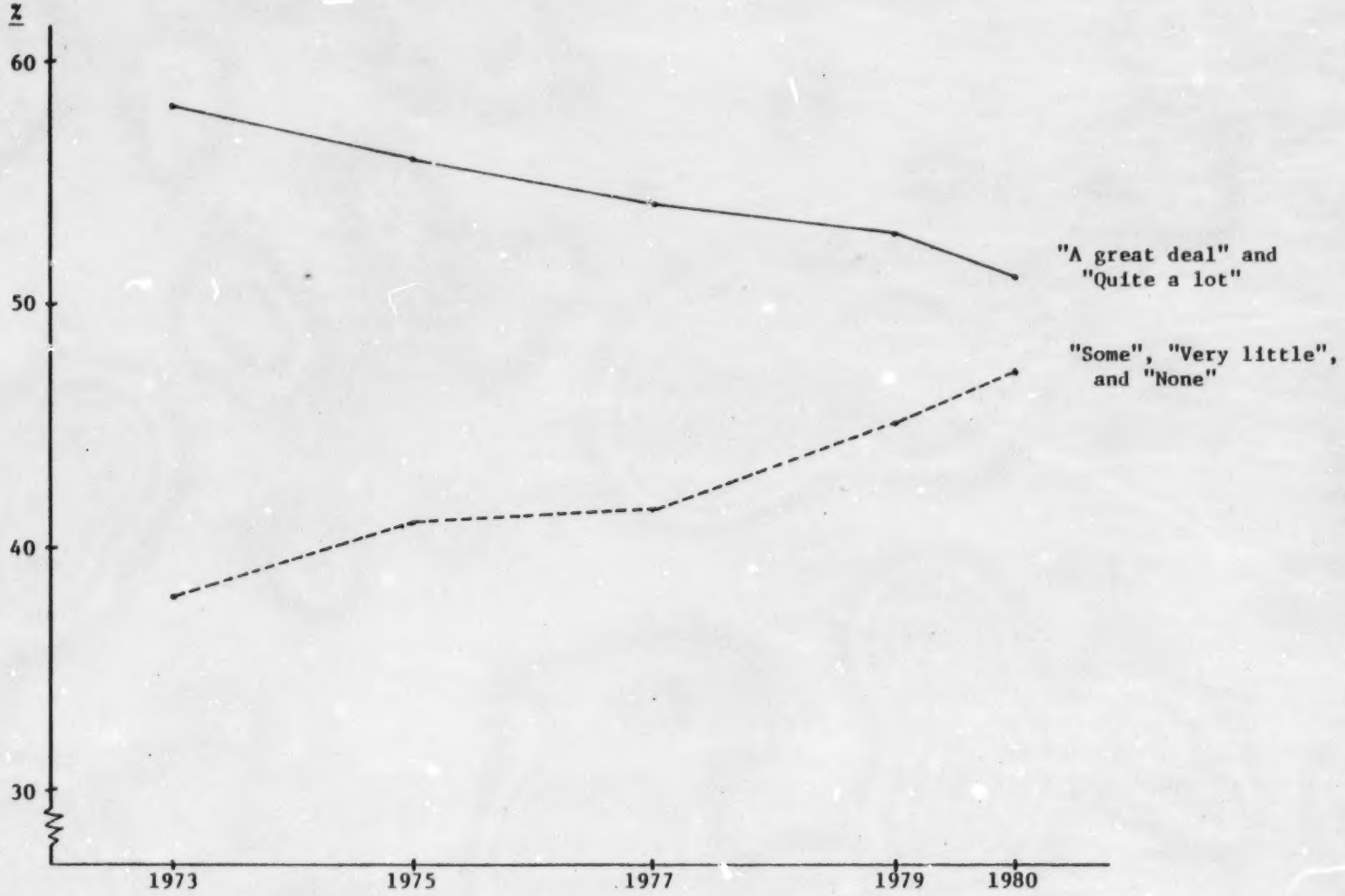

Fig. 2. Confidence in institutions: The public schools, 1973-1980
Source: As for Table 2; for 1980 data: Gallup 1981, 246.

TABLE 3

CONFIDENCE IN INSTITUTIONS: THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (CALIFORNIA)

	1973	1975	1981
A lot	23%	15%	12%
Some	51%	45%	39%
Not much	25%	38%	47%
No opinion	1%	2%	2%
"Confidence Index"*	90	40	30

*based on the ratio of positive to negative opinions (disregarding "some" category)

Source: For 1973 and 1975: Current Opinion 1975, 1980; for 1981: California Opinion Index 1981, October.

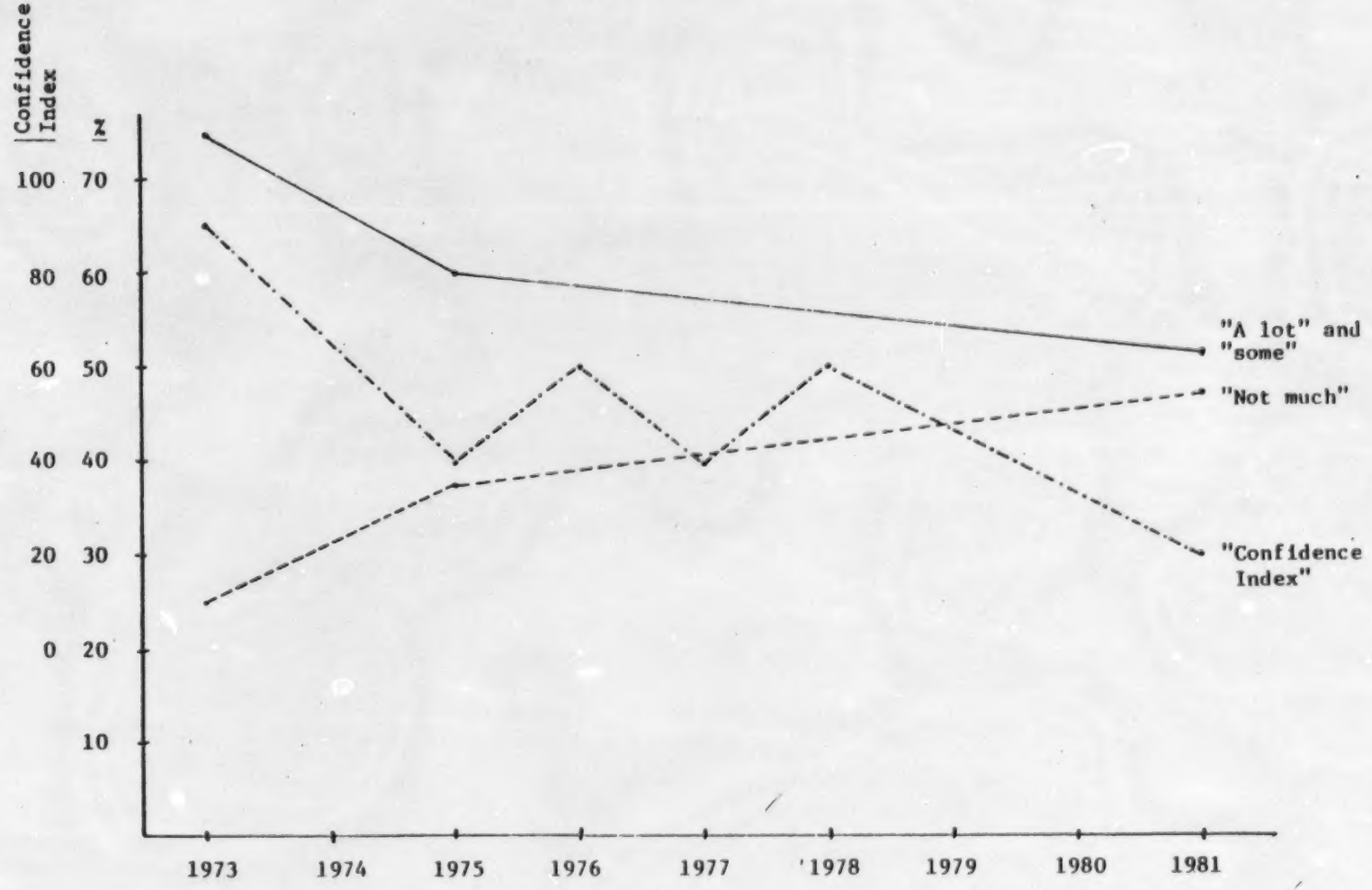

Fig. 3. Confidence in institutions: The public schools (California)
Source: As for Table 3.

TABLE 4

RESULTS OF U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOL BOND ELECTIONS, 1957-58 TO 1976-77

Fiscal Year	% Approved Based on Number	% Approved Based on Dollar Value
1957-58	71.8*	72.8
1958-59	77.2*	79.6
1959-60	67.3*	67.1
1960-61	74.3*	75.9
1961-62	72.2	68.8
1962-63	72.4	69.6
1963-64	72.5	71.1
1964-65	74.7	79.4
1965-66	72.5	74.5
1966-67	66.6	69.2
1967-68	67.6	62.5
1968-69	56.8	43.6
1969-70	53.2	49.5
1970-71	46.7	41.4
1971-72	47.0	44.0
1972-73	56.5	56.6
1973-74	56.2	53.0
1974-75	46.3	46.0
1975-76	50.8	46.1
1976-77	55.6	54.0

Source: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, National Center for Education Statistics, annual reports on Bond Sales for Public School Purposes. Cited in Digest of Education Statistics, 1980. Edited by W. Vance Grant and Leo J. Eiden. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980.

*Original data not available. Estimates based on predicted regression values.

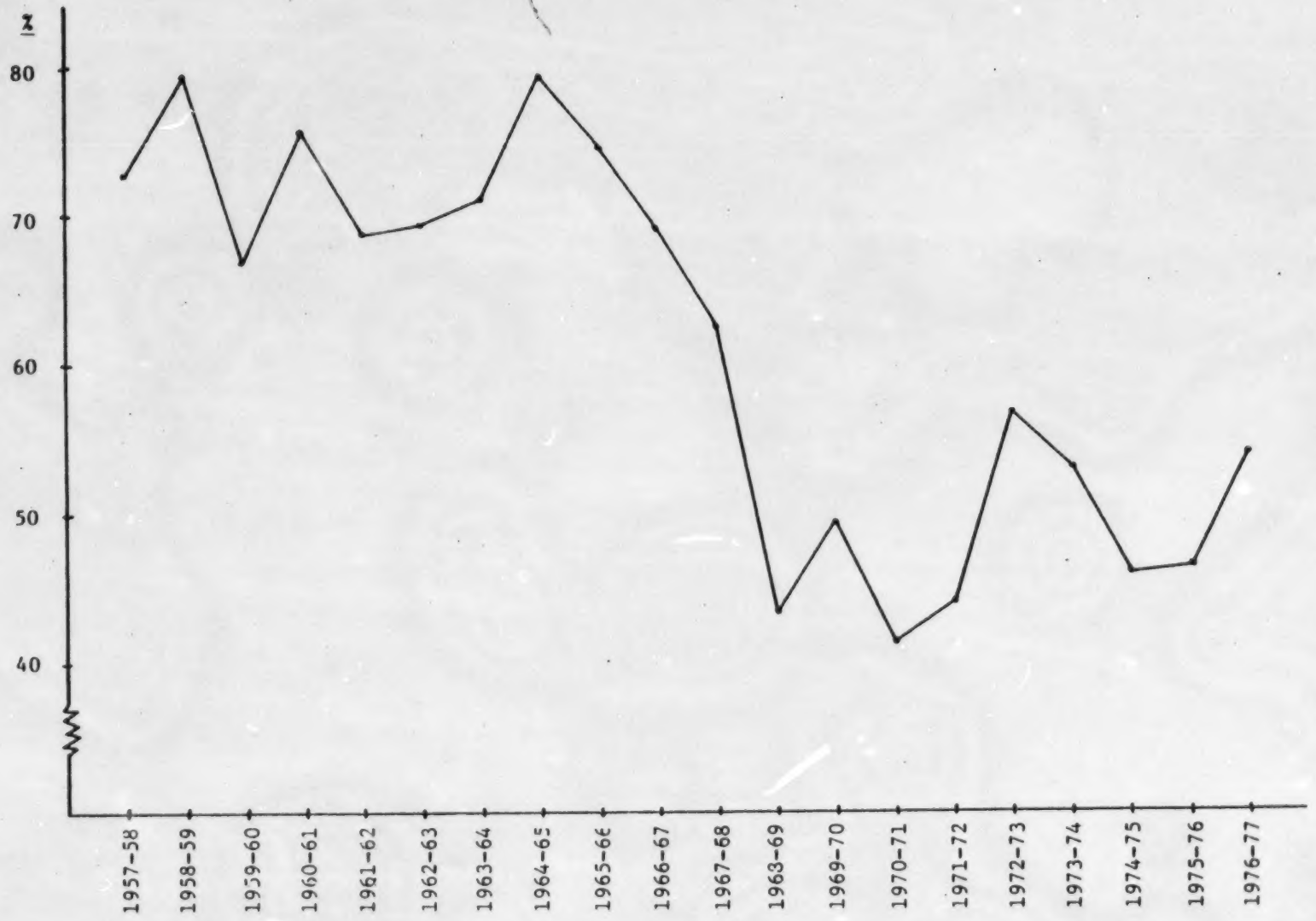

Fig. 4. Decline of approval of public school bond elections, 1957-58 to 1976-77 (based on dollar value)
Source: As for Table 4.

TABLE 5

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT INDEX, 1958-1978

	1958	1964	1968	1970	1972	1974	1976	1978
"Cynical"	11%	19%	26%	36%	36%	50%	53%	52%
Intermediate	25%	18%	24%	25%	24%	24%	23%	26%
"Trusting"	58%	61%	48%	38%	38%	24%	22%	19%
Not Scored	6%	2%	3%	1%	2%	2%	2%	3%
N	1822	1450	1348	1507	2285	2523	2870	2304
PDI*	47	42	22	2	2	-25	-31	-33

Source: W. Miller et al. 1980, 268

*Percentage Difference Index (PDI) is a summary statistic indicating the percentage difference between high and low scores. Negative PDI indicates higher percentage of low scores.

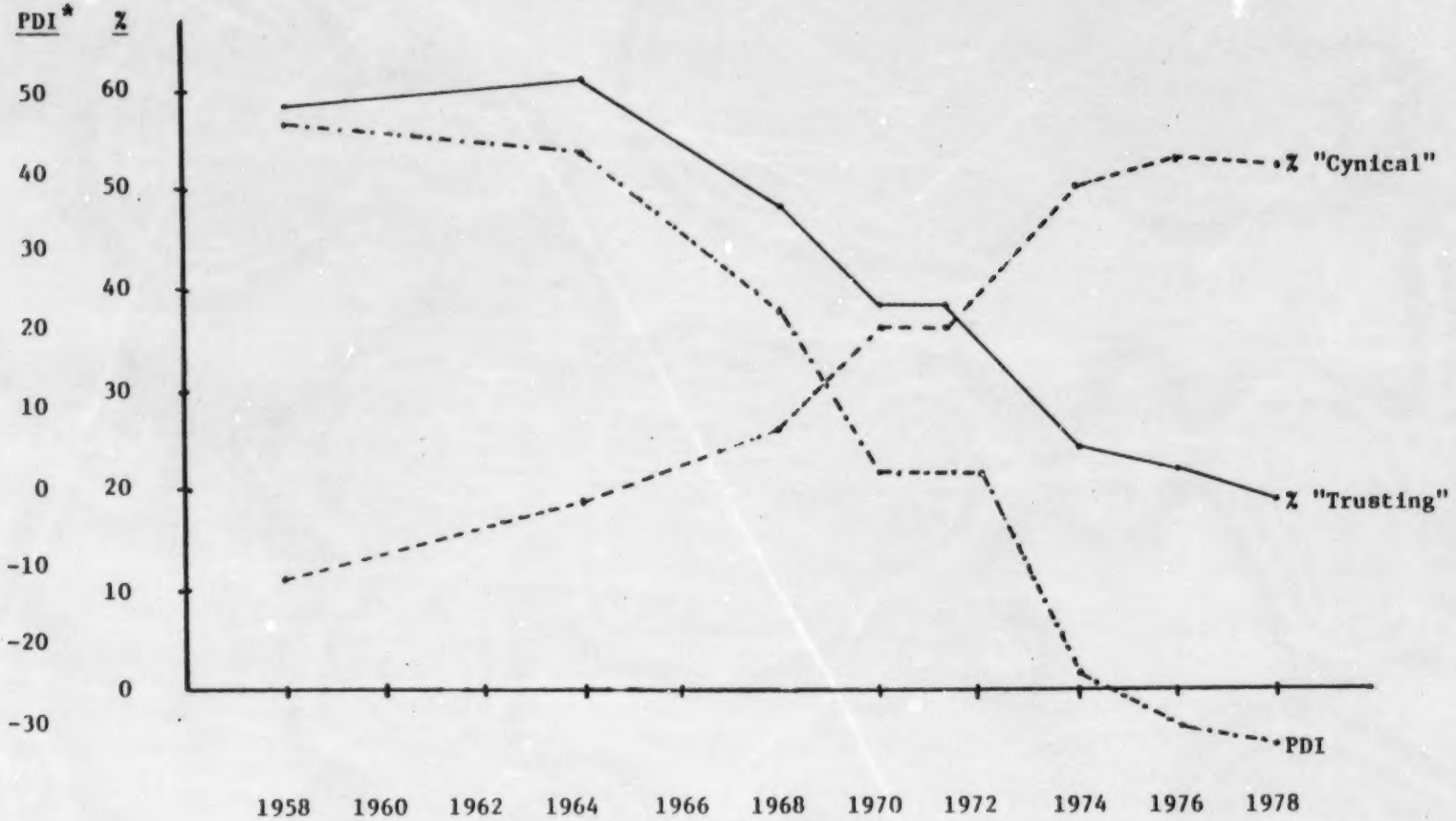

Fig. 5. Trust in government index, 1958-1978.
Source: W. Miller et al. 1980, 268.

*Percentage Difference Index (PDI) is a summary statistic indicating the percentage difference between high and low scores. Negative PDI indicates higher percentage of low scores.

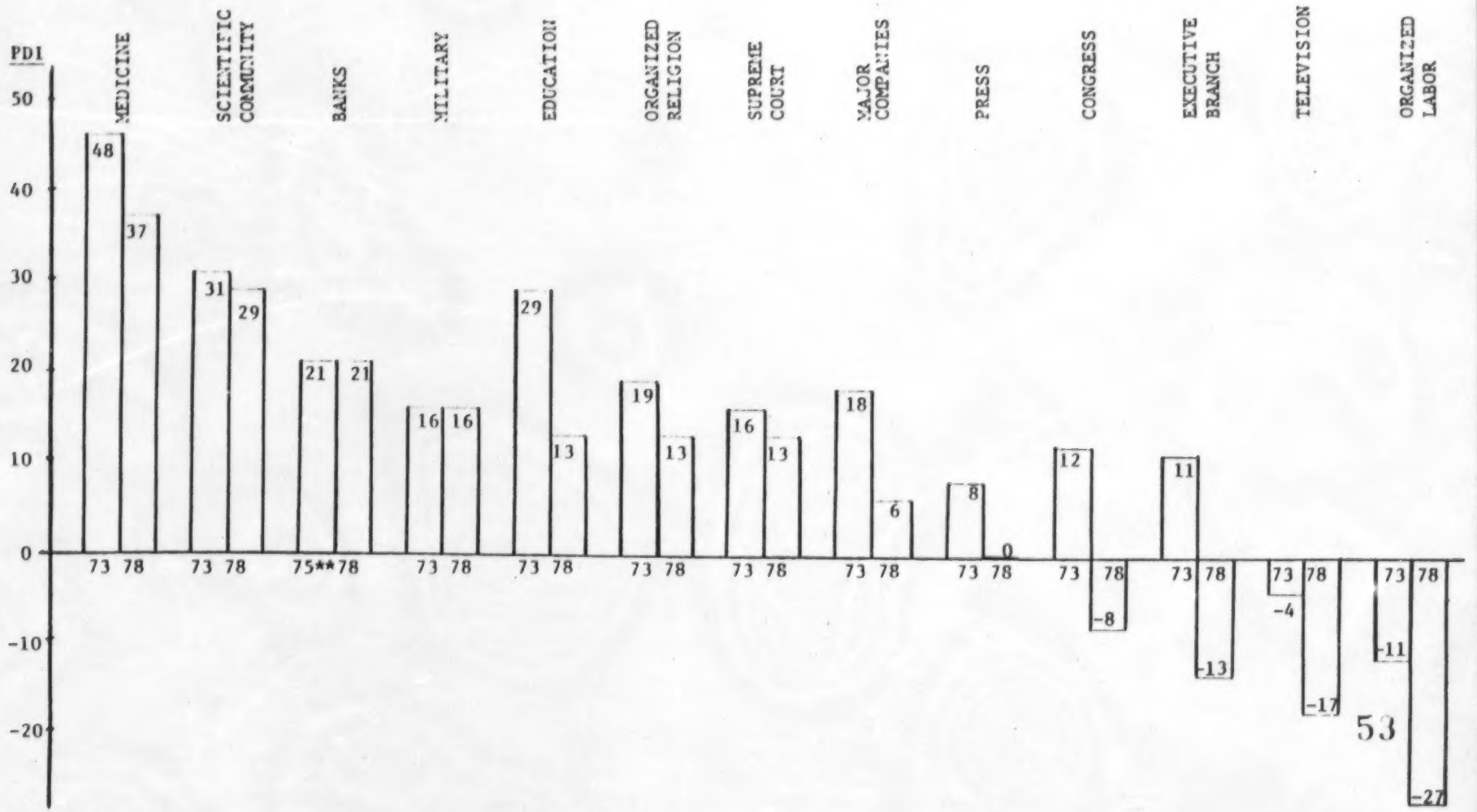

Fig. 6. Confidence in institutional leadership, 1973 and 1978 (Percentage Difference Index*)
Source: NORC 1978

*Difference between percentage of respondents who have "a great deal" of confidence and percentage of respondents who have "hardly any" confidence. Negative PDI means that the latter percentage is higher.

**1973 data not available.